

VINIT HAKSAR, EQUALITY, LIBERTY, AND PERFECTIONISM (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS), 1979.

Haksar's book is a tangled 300-page analysis and defense of the moral/political view called egalitarianism, "the doctrine that all human beings have the right to equal respect and consideration". Haksar's main concern is to argue that this view presupposes perfectionism, which includes the claim that some forms of human life are intrinsically better than others and the claim that (most) humans and (most of) their forms of life have greater intrinsic worth than nonhuman animals and their forms of life. Since perfectionism is a hierarchical view, it has often been thought incompatible with egalitarianism. But we will see that there is no such incompatibility, Haksar believes, once we realize that we can accept the perfectionist claims made above while still rejecting the claim that some humans are intrinsically better than others. Human individuals are equal, though their forms of life are not. In his final chapter, Haksar argues that this sort of perfectionism is not incompatible with toleration for individuals who are "hooked" on inferior forms of life.

Haksar realizes that the crucial question for egalitarianism has to do with animals. Why are all (or most) humans included in the egalitarian club while nonhuman animals are excluded? Haksar returns to this question again and again, devoting many pages to explaining why various popular views (such as contractarianism) cannot give an adequate answer. Unfortunately, the result of all this discussion is supposed to be the conclusion that in order to exclude animals and make sense of egalitarianism we must "appeal to perfectionist considerations, such as that human beings have more worth or significance than animals." These perfectionist judgments themselves, Haksar seems to think, cannot be shown to be true.

The interests of humans count for more

than the interests of animals, apparently, because humans have rationality, autonomy, self-consciousness, life-plans, "and so forth", while animals lack such characteristics. Indeed, "in order to include human infants in the egalitarian club we must take the line that what suffices is the possession of the relevant potential, and the actualization of the potential is not necessary". If we ask why such characteristics matter, why they invest their possessors with special worth, we find ourselves up against perfectionist judgments that have no justification, other than the justification which derives from "the reflective equilibrium model, according to which we match and mutually adjust our moral and other principles with our moral beliefs and intuitions until we get a harmonious fit".

Haksar's book will be of interest to philosophers concerned with the complexities of recent moral theory. There are detailed discussions of utilitarianism, Ronald Dworkin, Robert Nozick, John Rawls, and others. Many of Haksar's particular remarks seem correct and/or interesting. But I doubt that his perfectionist account of the moral status of animals will be found convincing. Nevertheless, it is probably salutary to reflect on his observation that "even if egalitarianism is extended to include the higher animals, it is difficult to avoid an appeal to perfectionist considerations; how else can we exclude ants and bees from the egalitarian club?"

Edward Johnson
University of New Orleans